Fireworks of a Different Kind

Posted At : July 3, 2014 10:27 AM | Posted By : Food Bank Staff
Related Categories: Volunteering

By Jean Thompson

Exactly one year ago today, I had my first exposure to Food Bank For New York City's Community Kitchen & Food Pantry in West Harlem. We had just started a program at my chocolate company with the introduction of a new bar, called jcoco, where we make a donation that helps provide a fresh serving of food to American food banks in the cities where the bars are sold. In NYC, we chose Food Bank For New York City because it is an overarching organization that has far-reaching tentacles in NYC, and a clear, focused mission to stomp out hunger.

I showed up to volunteer and was met by the lovely Food Bank employee Tiffany, who was brand new to the organization, and participating in her first soup kitchen volunteer stint, too. We donned our hairnets and aprons and were set up to serve the long queue of New Yorkers waiting for the soup kitchen to open. Debbie, a longtime Food Bank employee was in charge of our efforts. She had a certain confidence and comfort in her demeanor that told me she had done this a few times before. She was very specific in her instructions: "Don't let anyone have more than one helping, or we might run out of food and some people will go without." This made a lot of sense to me.

The doors opened and the people started streaming in. They knew the routine – they had done this before, too. They came in every shape, color, age and demographic. They were super excited that oxtail was on the menu that day. I was surprised and delighted that virtually every person thanked

us for coming to help, and for the food. Too many times in my life I have been disappointed by someone forgetting to thank me for a ride, or my business, or other little things. These people did not forget. As Debbie mentioned, many of them asked for more food than we were instructed to hand out. I wanted to give them just a half serving more; they looked hungry. Debbie stationed herself right next to me, probably because she sensed I would be too soft and she wanted to be there to remind me that there just wasn't enough to go around. I was surprised by the number of people that arrived around 5:30, harried because (I figured) they were rushing to get there after work. Yes, many of Food Bank's clients work and still cannot afford dinner for themselves or their families. As I scooped the vegetables and rice onto the plates, while trying to smile at every person, my brain was taking it all in and making sense of it. I didn't know college kids needed help with meals! What about that sweet young mother with two kids?

The Community Kitchen's facility is set up to look like a cafeteria, and music is piped in so the clients can dine in comfort. We were serving dinner on the night of July 3rd and all of a sudden Celine Dion came over the speaker singing God Bless America. The woman has the voice of an angel, and music has always had a way of penetrating my psyche and bringing forth emotions otherwise very well managed and suppressed. I started thinking, "Why does this happen in the USA?!" It didn't seem right. Then I realized that it was Americans working at Food Bank and this soup kitchen: helping other Americans, volunteering their time, and making it their life mission to do so. At that point that I realized that tears were streaming down my (usually stoic) face, and I had to hand my serving spoons to Tiffany to cover for me while I collected myself so the steady line of New Yorkers wouldn't see my emotions spilling all over my face.

Happy Birthday, America. Thank you for freedom and opportunity, and everything I cherish about my country. Thank you to Margarette, Tiffany, Debbie and all the great people at Food Bank for leading the charge in New York City to rid this great city of hunger...someday soon.

Jean Thompson
CEO, Seattle Chocolates
President's Council Member, Food Bank For New York City